



Hawaii State Department of Health

Disease Investigation Branch

Oahu 586-4586, Maui 984-8213, Hilo 933-0912,

Kona 322-4877, Kauai 241-3563

Diphtheria

What is diphtheria?

Diphtheria is a highly contagious, life-threatening bacterial disease that mainly affects the tonsils, throat, nose, and skin. It is caused by a bacterium called *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*.

How do you get it?

Anyone who is not immunized against diphtheria can get the disease. Diphtheria is spread to others through close or direct contact with the body fluids from an infected person. It may also be spread by contact with personal items, such as blankets or clothing, which were used by a person with diphtheria.

What are the symptoms of diphtheria?

The symptoms include sore throat, mild fever, swelling in the neck, and painful, swollen, red sores.

When do symptoms start?

The symptoms commonly begin 2 to 5 days after exposure to the bacteria, but can start in 1 to 6 days.

For how long is a person contagious?

Persons with diphtheria who do not get treatment are usually contagious for less than 2 weeks. In rare instances, an infected person may spread the bacteria for 6 months or more. When treated with medicine, the contagious period can be reduced to less than 4 days.

What is the treatment for diphtheria?

A doctor can prescribe medicines to treat diphtheria. If diphtheria is not treated, serious problems such as paralysis, heart failure, and blood disorders may occur.

If you get diphtheria once, can you get it again?

Yes. Having diphtheria does not always protect you from getting it a second time.

Is there a vaccine for diphtheria?

Yes. Diphtheria vaccine is usually given in a shot together with tetanus and pertussis vaccines, and is known as DTaP vaccine. A child should have had four DTaP shots by 18 months of age, with a booster shot at 4 to 6 years of age. After that, adolescents and adults should get a diphtheria and tetanus booster (Td) every 7-10 years throughout life for continued protection.

How can you keep from getting diphtheria?

The best way to prevent getting diphtheria is to get immunized.

For more information, see the CDC's website at http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/diphtheria_t.htm